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Letter dated 5 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to transmit to you, on behalf of my delegation and the Member States of France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, a letter dated 4 April 2017 from the High Negotiations Committee, as requested by the General Coordinator of the Committee, Riad Hijab (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Matthew Rycroft

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Annex to the letter dated 5 April 2017 from the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

[Original: Arabic]

It is with great concern that I write to you on behalf of the High Negotiations Committee regarding a new, horrific chemical weapons attack perpetrated against civilians in Idlib by the Syrian regime and its allies only four days after the close of the fifth round of peace talks in Geneva.

At approximately 6:30 a.m. on Tuesday 4 April, planes carrying weapons loaded with unidentified chemicals carried out an attack on the northern quarter of the town of Khan Shaykhun in Idlib. At least 100 people were killed in the air raids, including no fewer than 10 children. More than 200 others were injured. Doctors reported that the victims exhibited symptoms consistent with exposure to the nerve agent Sarin, including bleeding and foaming from the nose and mouth, convulsions, fainting, vomiting and constricted irises. Both photographic and video footage provide clear and conclusive evidence that the victims were the target of a chemical attack. Eyewitness reports also indicate that, on the heels of those brutal attacks, one of the clinics treating victims of chemical exposure was deliberately targeted by airstrikes. Sources report that Syrian regime aircraft and those of their allies were flying over Idlib on Tuesday and that they bear clear responsibility for the attacks.

This deadly attack on civilians in Idlib — most likely involving chemical weapons — ranks among the most horrific atrocities committed since Assad's forces killed some 1,500 civilians in August 2013 using chemical weapons. It also amounts to a war crime as defined in the United Nations Chemical Weapons Convention and in the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods in Warfare, to which Syria acceded on 14 September 2013 and 17 December 1968, respectively. Most importantly, it constitutes a direct violation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2209 (2015), 2235 (2015), 2254 (2015), 2258 (2015), 2268 (2016), 2332 (2017) and 2118 (2013), in which the Security Council unanimously decided, in the event of any use of chemical weapons by anyone in the Syrian Arab Republic, to impose measures under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations.

While the Syrian regime makes a show of engaging in negotiations, its actions in Idlib and across Syria tell an altogether different story. It is high time that Security Council resolution 2118 (2013) was enforced. The climate of impunity that has long reigned in Syria has allowed atrocities involving chemical weapons to multiply, creating conditions in which the Syrian regime and its allies feel emboldened to use chemical weapons, and to starve and bomb civilians at will. However, it is not too late to deter further chemical weapon attacks or to salvage prospects for peace in Geneva. A genuine effort on the part of Security Council members to enforce international law, including Security Council resolution 2118 (2013), can save lives in Syria and create conditions conducive to real peace talks in Geneva. The Syrian opposition therefore calls on the Council and its members to:

(a) Authorize an immediate investigation of the chemical weapon attacks in Idlib; instruct the relevant agencies to test the bodies of the Idlib victims in order to identify the substance used to kill them; confirm whether Sarin was the gas responsible for these heinous attacks, and identify the perpetrators.

(b) Deter future atrocities involving chemical weapons by protecting Syrian civilians from future indiscriminate attacks. Future ceasefire violations must be deterred and reported accurately when they occur. Credible efforts must also be made to curb war crimes.

(c) Uphold international humanitarian law by enforcing Security Council resolution 2118 (2013) and take immediate action to impose measures under Chapter VII of the Charter, including sanctions on the perpetrators of Tuesday's deadly chemical attacks.

(d) Ensure that any party that gasses, starves or bombs Syrian civilians is held accountable by referring the case of Syria to the International Criminal Court. If that route remains blocked, Member States should establish a special tribunal and apply domestic and universal jurisdiction in order to deliver justice to the victims.

The High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian opposition stands ready to assist any impartial investigation into Tuesday's chemical weapon attacks. Furthermore, we remain committed to achieving a political solution in Syria. However, such a solution cannot be reached so long as the Syrian regime is allowed to slaughter innocent women and children with impunity. The Syrian regime gasses children because it believes that the world will not act to stop it. Assad is counting on the Security Council's paralysis and apathy, hoping that his atrocities will destroy prospects for peace. However, the Security Council is not the only means of taking action. Member States can and must take unilateral measures to enforce international law and save lives. Member States have the opportunity — and a responsibility — to prove Assad wrong. The Syrian people are counting on you to do so.

(*Signed*) Riad **Hijab**
General Coordinator, High Negotiations Committee
of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces